

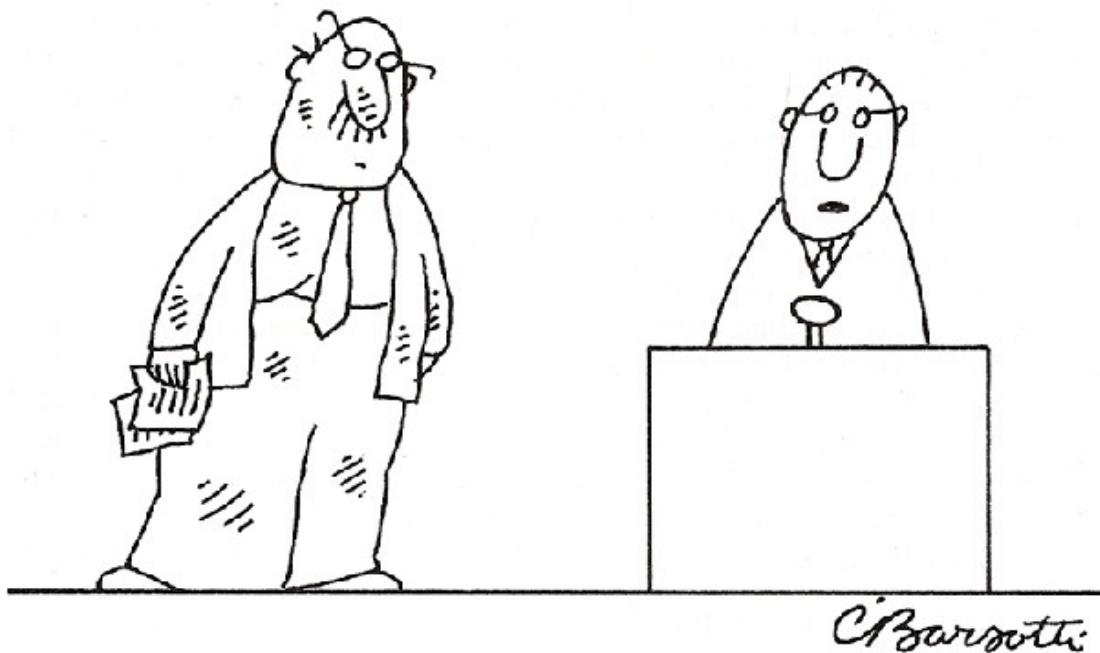
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Anxiety: How I Have Learned to Put it Aside



"Our next speaker looked into the abyss and made a few notes."

A Mind is a Terrible Thing!

Yes, this is a common riff on what is probably the most successful advertising slogan of all time!

I mean this to be personal, so I use the word “terrible” in its original sense; meaning, something that is frightening.

To a person on the spectrum, such as myself, the mind can indeed be a frightening thing. I’ll have more on the etymology of “terrible” in a moment; for now, just note how comforting it is to me to use a word in its literal sense.

In fact, I was troubled when I first thought to describe “A Mind is a Terrible Thing” as a “riff.” After all, the literal meaning of “riff” probably comes from a phonetic shortening of the word “refrain,” and a refrain is something that is repeated. Yet, I was okay with using the word not in its literal meaning, but in its most commonly used sense, which is “a variation on a theme.”

This, dear reader, is your first taste of anxiety from me. Can you imagine what it’s like to worry about each and every word you use in each and every sentence (whether written or spoken), every day of your life? It’s tiring, if nothing else. When I am stressed out, or tired, I know it’s time to stop talking (not that I always do), because that’s when bad things start to come out of my mouth – not evil things, necessarily; just wrong things or inaccurate reports. Sometimes, though, hurtful things do emerge. I call this garbage mouth, because I usually do not mean to say them; they may not even be true, and they are certainly not thought out, carefully or otherwise. They are not conscious thoughts over which I have any control, and it can be a bit frightening, to get back to that word.

By way of background, let me confess that my academic training is in Economics, and I had a long and successful career in the investment business. In other words, I am totally unqualified to address the subject of anxiety. I have no formal training in neurology or psychology. That said, I will also admit that I have given the topic of anxiety a lot of thought, from the perspective of an autistic person, of a person with Asperger syndrome (AS). This writing is my attempt to share that perspective with you.

As I proceed through my discourse, if you have a neurotypical (NT) mind, my non-linear way of thinking may disturb or distract you. “What’s his point?” you might find yourself thinking. Bear with me, please. I think that, by the end, I will tie everything together and you will see that, even though our minds may process information in different ways, we can end up in the same place.

So, back to my riff: “A Mind is a Terrible Thing!” The word “terrible” can be traced

back to the Sanskrit word meaning “to tremble.”

Terrible: from the Latin *terribilis*, by way of Middle French and Middle English. [Its roots mean “to frighten” — akin to the Latin *terror*, which moved to Anglo-French as *terrour*, via Middle English, back to modern English as *terror* again!] From the Greek *trein* (to be afraid, flee) and *tremein* (to tremble), from the Sanskrit *trasati* ([he] trembles).

And now, by way of juxtaposition, let me paraphrase an even more ancient authority, Andy Williams.

It can also be said that “A Mind is a Many-Splendored Thing.”

To quote from the song, it is “nature’s way of giving
a reason to be living...”

Those of us on the spectrum are both blessed and cursed with a different kind of mind. Our minds are both terrible and wonderful.

Throughout my life, I have known both sides of this coin. Or, if you prefer a less black-and-white way of thinking, I have known multiple facets of this many-splendored thing!

I have known the intense joy of loving until it hurts.

I have known the heartache of losing a friendship, or a job, for reasons that I did not comprehend.

I have contemplated the mysteries of our universe. In fact, I pretty much do that every day. I stand in awe of all that surrounds me. I have been awestruck by such things as the simple complexity of an ant colony that I accidentally disrupted.

I am enraptured by nature, and I often worship the splendor of that great cathedral we call the outdoors. Every year, I climb Mount Washington, partly to prove I can still do it, but mostly to experience the joy (and pain!) of being that much closer to the heavens. When the ground is dry enough, I romp on my horse through the woods and fields near my house. Recently, I spent five glorious, sunny days hurling my body down Sugarloaf Mountain. I have skied in the Alps, in the Rockies, and in the Sierras, among other place, each one of these more beautiful than the other.

I have stood in the amphitheater at Delphi, and felt the presence of Apollo. At the other end of the earth, I have stood before the Altar of the Sun at Machu Picchu,

and, in my mind, experienced the power of the priests of the Sun God as they rescued the world from darkness. Both of these places took my breath away, both literally and figuratively, and I experienced first-hand the aboriginal yearning of the human soul for religion.

I have also traveled to different parts of the world, to places where I wanted to be alone and where I knew no one could find me. I have panhandled on the streets of Manhattan, and I have used a subway car as a hotel room. When I had a job, working in a bookstore in Springfield, I lived in a single room occupancy hotel (the polite term for a flophouse) for \$9 a week, where the shower was down the hall and often out of order, and I had to shake the cockroaches out of my shoes every morning before putting them on.

I have, at a different time of my life, forgotten my every care, floating on a silent sea, above colorful fish, weaving their way below my mask through a coral reef, in a strange world in which I felt at home.

I have terrified people I love with my behavior, which at times has come from some alien place deep within me. I have been terrified, too, by things that seem real at the time, but turn out to be nothing but waking nightmares. All of these things come from somewhere in my mind that I cannot reach nor fathom.

I have felt warm tears of ecstasy stream down my face as I have listened to beautiful music; of Bach or Beethoven, and many others, including popular music.

Yes, all of these joys, and all of these sorrows, and many, many more, have been mine.

Perhaps I am not describing experiences that are unique to persons on the spectrum. In fact, I'm sure that's true. Yet, my hunch is that what is different about my experiences from those of someone with a neurotypical mind is that I experience these things with a frequency and an intensity of emotion that is beyond my ability to fully describe.

My partner has told me she thinks I have the soul of a poet. I believe she is right. She and others have told me that I have the ability to experience the world in an ever-fresh way, to describe what I feel (in words either written or spoken), to express my joy and my awe. I am also able to describe my anguish.

Perhaps no one has captured in words this many-splendored jewel as well as the poet Khalil Gibran, who grew up in the South End of Boston. Some of you may be familiar with his book, ***The Prophet***, and I quote briefly here from the chapter *On Joy and Sorrow*:

"Your joy is your sorrow unmasked.

And the selfsame well from which your laughter rises was oftentimes filled with your tears. And how else can it be? The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain. ... [joy and sorrow] are inseparable."

Here, he is describing the human condition, not autism. Yet, as I said, I believe that my highs and my lows have been more frequent, and more intense, than those of that other 99% of the world who were unfortunate (or, perhaps fortunate, from their point of view) to have been born with a built-in levelheadedness that I will never know.

Things that are external to me are of little note or interest to me. I live in clutter, I admit that, yet, I know where everything is. The laundry and the dishes get washed only when I run out of useable, clean items. I don't remember the names of external things, like flowers, or streets, or people. You could repaint my house a different color while I was away, and when I returned, I probably wouldn't notice. Yet, ask me about Gibrat's Law of Proportionate Effect, and I could tell you of its wonders. Because it is inside my mind.

In the Asperger community, there is a well-known dilemma that students face when asked by a well-intentioned math teacher to "show their work." For neurotypical students, this process may be helpful for the teacher, to discover whether the students just stumbled upon the answer (or copied it from their neighbor), or indeed understand the logic of the process that goes into the calculation. For those of us with Asperger's, however, this can present an unmeetable demand. Part of the difference in the way our brains process information is that we are often able to execute large chunks of logic rapidly, at a subconscious level. We therefore cannot access the steps that led up to the conclusion; it is simply obvious to us that the answer is correct.

During my career, I often encountered that "show your work" syndrome. Since my field was finance, I would study and experiment with (on the computer and in my mind) the equations of financial theory and with the probability distributions that are part and parcel of the business.

In my days as a research analyst on Wall Street, I would develop new products and different analytical methods. I could envision, in multiple dimensions (and usually in color) the geometry of changing certain parameters of an equation. So, if I wanted to produce a given result, I knew how to do it, and I would tell my co-workers how to program our computers to achieve what I envisioned. Those who didn't know me well would often challenge me to explain why I thought my idea would work. I tried to explain, but often couldn't. Those who knew me better just gave me a quizzical look and then did what I suggested. More often than not, the

results were as I expected. Then came the "How did you know?" questions, and I could not explain how I had arrived at my new methodology. I just knew that it would work.

So that was part of my success, that I was able to invent new things, or new ways of solving old problems. But there were lots of people like me working on Wall Street. Good ideas were a dime a dozen. What made me successful with clients was my willingness to share. If someone wanted to know how I did something, I would just tell them (like any good Aspergerian, in infinite detail!).

And then, I would often become the victim of my own success. I wanted to create more things, not endlessly explain my old ideas. Yet, helping clients was satisfying, too, and it's what paid the bills, so I tried to do both.

My competitors, I discovered, held their methodologies close to their chest. I would reveal all. This was enormously helpful to people. Once I had discovered a good idea, I wanted to get rid of it. Because tomorrow, I would have an even better idea! My peers seemed to treat their ideas as state secrets, as if losing control of them would doom their careers.

Now, perhaps it has occurred to you that there are two models at work here. One, the competitive, capitalistic model. The other, the cooperative, scientific approach. I'm guessing that there is something in the Aspergerian personality that lends itself to the scientific method. There are no secrets, only truths. There is too much that we do not know to stifle the flow of information. As Laplace said, "What we know is not much. What we do not know is immense."

In contrast, John Maynard Keynes wrote that "Capitalism is the extraordinary belief that the nastiest of men, for the nastiest of reasons, will somehow work for the benefit of us all."

Think about the major scientific figures of Western culture. Galileo, Newton, Darwin, Einstein, and so many others. How many of these do you think were autistic? How many of our major scientific discoveries were made by Aspergerians? I don't know the answer, though I'm sure the percentage is very high.

To summarize my life experiences in a slightly different way: from a very early age, I have had difficulty with simple things, like tying my shoes. At the same time, I was aware that I had a capacity for thinking that was very different from those around me. This combination of awkwardness and brilliance has led to a life full of both struggles and triumphs.

These extremes, as I said, are, I believe, a hallmark of being Aspergerian. Being

able to fully experience the greatest joys of which a human being is capable, yet subject also to experiencing deep and traumatic emotional pain. With perfect hindsight, having lived a life full of both joy and pain, I would not, for anything in the world, discard all the sorrows I have known if it also meant having to give up my huge capacity for joy.

Still, wouldn't it be nice to experience the highs without having to go through the agony of deep depression, the pain of self-loathing, and the dysfunctional meltdowns that result from an overload of stress, compounded, or even caused, in many cases, by sensory overload?

This is the challenge that I have set before myself for the past couple of years, as my awareness has grown of what Asperger's has meant in my life, and how I can have some control over its negative aspects. As an aside, I should mention that I became 64 years old in 2010, and I received my diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome less than 3 years earlier, at age 61.

In that time, I have learned that the autistic brain is more plastic than the neurotypical, or NT, brain, which means, among other things, that you CAN teach an old dog new tricks. Like so many neurological and psychological phenomena, the superior brain plasticity of autistics does not for a moment imply that NTs can't do the same thing; it's just easier for those of us on the spectrum.

Over the past few months, I have developed many new coping strategies, with the help of a large support network; including the staff of AANE, my fellow participants in a adult AS support group sponsored by AANE, and a loving partner who has seen first-hand the good, the bad, and the ugly of Asperger's.

I believe that one of the greatest insights I have acquired into my past, as well as the present, has come from the understanding of the relationship (for me) among stress, response, and resulting depression. For many years, I had been counseled by psychotherapists and physicians to treat my depression with medication, and I had always resisted that suggestion. I felt that my bouts of depression represented a symptom, and not the root problem. After 40+ years of having that argument, I am now convinced that I was correct all along; and I now have a good handle on what works for me in dealing with this challenge.

I have listed here the components of my Anxiety cycles, as I have come to think of them.

◆ Stress

Stress could arise from one traumatic event, or a series of small things that add up, or sensory overload, or some combination of these things.

◆ Trigger

There comes a point when the stress load become intolerable. The “trigger” may be an obvious trauma, or it may simply be the final straw, which might be known to me, or it might be an unaccounted for snapping under the cumulative weight of too much stress.

◆ Reaction

I experience a strong, visceral response in my desire to relieve the stress; the activation of the oft-discussed fight or flight syndrome.

◆ Action

My actual response. If I give in to my first impulse, my action could be a verbal lashing-out, or it might involve a fit of rage, or fleeing the scene. Or, it could be some or all of these things – or, none of them. I have a choice.

◆ Depression

My time of healing. Depression is a lovely, self-indulgent experience. It is a time when I withdraw from the world, feel sorry for myself, and entertain thoughts that perhaps this is the way I deserve to feel. There is little I can do to hasten the end of this part of the cycle. Of late, though, I have learned to lessen its impact. I simply repeat the mantra, “this, too, shall pass.” After all, the worst part of the cycle is behind me. The bad stuff has already happened.

◆ Resolution

I'm ready to face the world again.

These cycles may be short or long, and one does not have to play out before another one begins.

Now, which of these things can I manage? There are two keys here: controlling the level of stress, and modifying my action, or response. The other things, I really have very little control over.

Being neurotic is part of being Aspergerian. When I use the word "neurotic" I of course realize that it has no scientific validity; I am using it in the Woody Allen sense. I associate this word with someone who is uncomfortable in social situations, is prone to bouts of depression or anxiety, who over-reacts to negative emotions, has a tendency to paranoia; also to seeing the worst possible outcome as the most likely one. I am working, with some success, to overcome these inborn tendencies. I have many long years of bad habits and attitudes to overcome.

You don't have to be Aspergerian to have these personality traits, though if you do have Asperger's, this description probably fits. These are the places an Asperger's personality takes one, and to overcome these tendencies requires self-awareness, an act of will, and plenty of practice.

I also recommend a good dose of self-acceptance. As I have become aware of the limitations thrust upon me by my condition, I have come to accept these limitations as challenges to work around, rather than as moral failings, or the result of being a slacker. For most of my life, I have been full of self-recriminations over my lack of executive function and my inability to focus on anything for very long.

Now, I accept that I need help with such things as my personal finances, and I have gotten that help. I have come to view my ADHD-personality as a plus, rather than a negative. I have noticed that if I spend too much time on one activity, I suffer from overload.

Recently, I've heard that one rule of thumb regarding people with Asperger's is to expect them to be able to accomplish half as much in twice the time as NTs. This may be true of some things I do, which is when I need help with those executive function tasks. In many areas, however, it's the other way around – I accomplish twice as much in half the time.

In those moments, I do not know how to work at half speed. So the only way to get relief from such intensity is to change the subject for a while. Then I can come back to the original task, refreshed and able to work at full speed again. I call this time-sharing. I accomplish much during a given time span, it's just that I may not finish tasks in the order in which I started them.

In like vein, I have figured out ways to cope with my anxiety cycles, defeat my natural tendencies to succumb to those neurotic personality tics, and to retain the joys I experience, while raising the floor beneath me, so that I don't have as far to fall.

These strategies are, superficially, very simple, and I will now share some of them with you. Trust me, though, implementation takes great willpower, perseverance, and the willingness to get it wrong some of the time. Still, the rewards are great.

Here are some of the things I've taught myself to do:

- ✓ **The Power of Positive Thinking!** Yes, it really does work. When my mind wanders, as it naturally does, to the worst possible outcome, I remind myself that there are many other possible outcomes, too, and maybe they are even more likely.
- ✓ **Stress Recognition and Avoidance.** I have learned to watch for the telltale signs of stress, and to be willing to take steps immediately to relieve the tension. If I am developing a headache because of bright lights or loud noise, it's okay for me to leave the room. I used to try to tough it out. Now, I take a walk in the fresh air, with or without making excuses. If a situation is really bad, I simply leave and go home. My partner has been very helpful with all of this, being understanding if I want to go home early, and also recognizing some of the signs in me of stress that may escape me, and gently letting me know about that.
- ✓ **Impulse Control.** I noticed, a while back, that there was a disconnect between my heart and my mind. It seemed that only one of them was involved at any moment in time. If my intellect was in charge, I tended to be calm, rational, and dispassionate; able to make sensible decisions. If, on the other hand, my emotions were in control, I could not think straight, and would do absolutely bizarre things.

I came to realize that in those emotional moments, whatever impulse came to me was probably exactly the wrong thing to do. And, I have the scars to prove it. So, I simply decided to recognize those moments, and to put those impulses on hold. I would engage my brain before opening my mouth, as the saying goes. This was very, very hard at first. I've gotten better at it with practice. It often involves NOT reacting to feeling hurt; it means NOT running away when that is what I most want to do. It means reaching out with affection to my partner when that is the thing I feel least like doing.

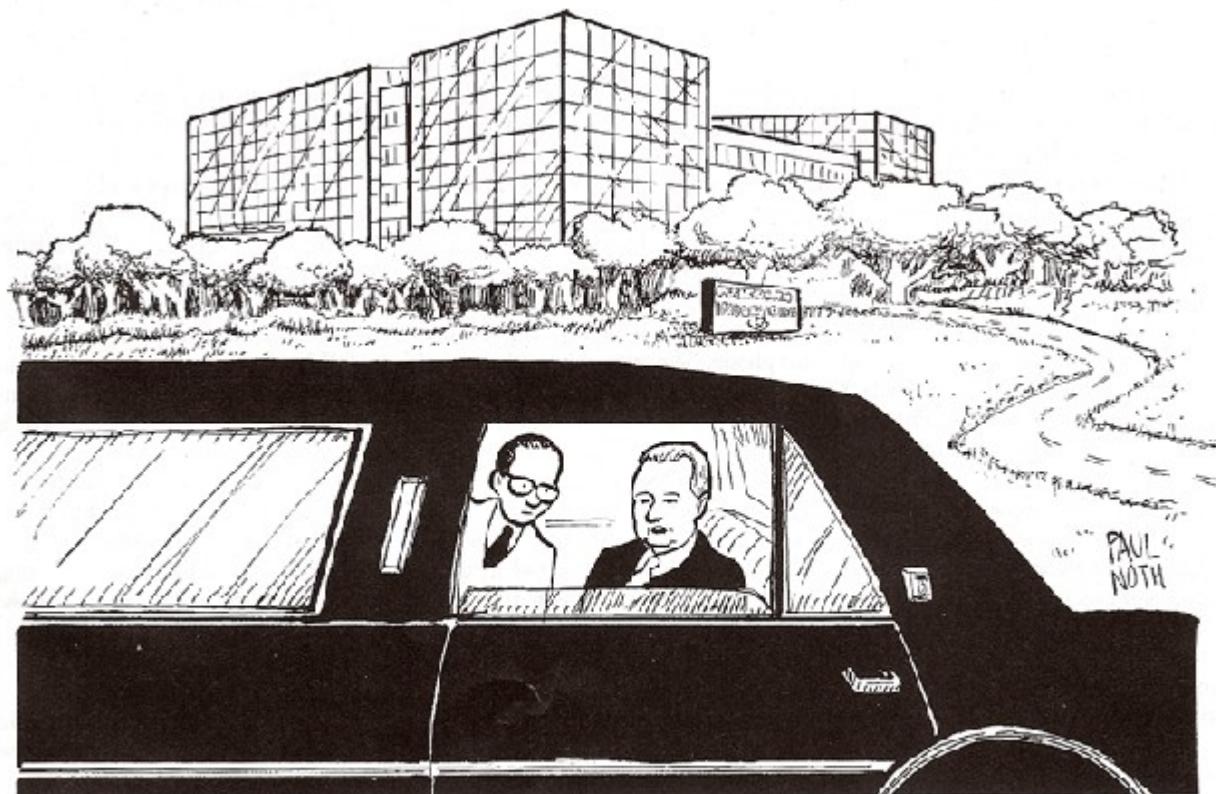
I have been helped along this path with a low dose of clonazepam, a mild anti-anxiety drug. This helped slow down my reaction time, and I've done the rest by

sheer dint of effort and exercise of will. The results have been amazing, and my anxiety cycles have become less frequent, less deep, and shorter. I have, in effect, raised the floor beneath me, without giving up any of the upside.

✓ **Perspective-taking.** One of the things that has helped me connect my emotional life with my intellect has been a conscious effort to do a better job of perspective-taking. More specifically, I have tried to look at myself as the other person might see me. This has put a lot of my formerly impulsive behaviors in a rather bad light.

To aid me in doing this, it has helped me to understand that I know only one reality — mine. I had always thought, however subconsciously, that my understanding of events was the one true way. Now, I know better. I know this in my core, not just as a concept. I know that if two people share an experience, there were actually two different experiences, not just mine, and that the other person's reality is just as valid as mine. That's a bitter pill to swallow, but it has helped me to be successful in my impulse control.

✓ Which brings me to my last point. **NO MORE LILIES!**



"Johnson, look at the lilies of the field. They neither spin nor toil! Fire them."

This is a great cartoon, and represents a change in my mode of thinking about the world. I have come to the conclusion that I have led an undisciplined life, and I want that to end.

My philosophy of life was a lot like Alfred E. Newman; "What, me worry?" Or, more elegantly, as expressed in these words from the Sermon on the Mount:

"Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. ... Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.

... Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble."

For most of my life, whenever I was feeling down and out (which was often), I would simply remind myself that somehow, things seemed to work out. Friends would come to my rescue, or I would receive an unexpected windfall just when I ran out of money. This hope carried me through the dark days.

Yet, I now know that this is a dysfunctional approach to dealing with (potential) problems. If I can't do something, I need to get help. I never wanted, nor thought I needed, any help. I knew that I had become successful because I had built a network of close friends, because I had worked for good employers who paid for my college tuition, because I befriended professors and colleagues, who became eager to help me, and I appreciated this. I had built my own support network, and found my own accommodations, all without being fully aware of how dependent I was upon these things.

I have now come full circle, and finally realize that I need to consciously reach out for help and support. I'm much happier for it. Life is good, even knowing, as I do, that

A Mind is a Terrible Thing!

